

THE U.S. AND THE PHILIPPINES: A FIVE POINT STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

The battle over the Philippine presidency did not end when the Philippine National Assembly proclaimed incumbent Ferdinand Marcos the winner of the February 7 elections. Opposition candidate Corazon Aquino immediately challenged the results, claiming that the election process and vote counting procedures were fraudulent. Aquino and her supporters vow to mount a progressive campaign of non-violent civil disobedience designed to topple the Marcos regime. This effort is supported by the powerful Catholic Church.

Surprised at the strength of the opposition movement and by the extensive and undisguised election fraud, the Reagan Administration and Congress have begun reassessing U.S. policy toward Manila. Options range from forcing Marcos from office, to putting him on trial, to strict neutrality on the elections' outcome, to working closely with him to ensure continued U.S. access to its key military bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Field. Washington is fast coming to the conclusion that unless the situation can quickly be stabilized in a way acceptable to the majority of the Philippine people, the only winners in the elections will be the radical Left, which wants both Marcos and the U.S. out of the Philippines. The challenge for Aquino is to prevent her campaign from being co-opted by the radicals.

Despite its justified abhorrence of the election fraud and post-election violence, the United States cannot afford to be hasty in reformulating its policy toward the Philippines. Washington should be ready to help defuse the political confrontation if Marcos and opposition leader Aquino desire mediation. This will require careful

public statements by U.S. officials that avoid inflaming Filipino opinion against the U.S. It is essential that the U.S. encourage the opposition to remain moderate. Simultaneously, the U.S. strongly should begin to urge Marcos to address honestly the widespread Filipino outrage over election fraud. This could prevent radicals from using the outrage to trigger violence and to split the moderate opposition. Washington should not endorse the election results until a settlement acceptable to the Filipino people has been reached.

If these immediate efforts are successful, then Washington must craft a policy that presses Manila to scuttle the economic cronyism which has been crippling the Philippines' once vigorous economy, to reform the structure and personnel of the military, and to launch a program that demonstrates to Filipinos that their democratic system still merits their confidence. In so pressing Manila, Washington should use the levers of public and private suasion and foreign aid packages.

To succeed in this, the Reagan Administration will need great flexibility to deal with what surely will be a protracted fluid situation. Already, in fact, the Soviet Union has rushed to exploit U.S.-Marcos tensions by being the first country to congratulate Marcos on his "victory." Precipitate U.S. action, such as a freeze on U.S. aid to the Philippines, would only serve Moscow's interests. At the same time, the U.S. must be ready to get tough with Marcos.

When political conditions stabilize in the Philippines, Washington and Manila then can address the future of U.S. bases. In the interim, however, the Administration should make clear to the Filipino people that preservation of Philippine democracy is more important than the bases. Marcos no longer should feel that he can use the bases to blackmail Washington.

Prudence dictates that contingency plans be drawn up by the Administration to ensure the safety of American lives and property. The Communist Party of the Philippines has been emboldened by the election to contemplate violence against Americans. Finally, steps should be taken to complete plans for the relocation of Clark and Subic should their use become untenable.

In sum, the Reagan Administration should pursue a five-point policy toward the Philippines:

- 1) Retain flexibility in order to influence the fluid Philippine situation;
- 2) Use U.S. leverage to bring the Filipino moderate opposition into the Philippine decision-making process;
- 3) Press Manila for political, economic, and military reforms;

4) Design a U.S. aid package to support reforms in the Philippines;

5) Delay discussions of the future of the U.S. military bases in the Philippines until after the situation in that country becomes resolved.

THE ELECTIONS

The authors of this Background personally witnessed the Philippine election as part of a 19-nation international observer delegation jointly sponsored by the National Republican and National Democratic Institutes for International Affairs. On the basis of these observations, there is no doubt that fraud was extensive enough to affect the outcome of the election. This is not to say that Marcos lacks popular support. He remains very popular among broad segments of the Philippine people. But whether he is more popular than challenger Aquino is a matter that only a free election could determine. Surely, his 1.5 million vote victory margin was a result of fraud.

The preelection campaign was characterized by high drama and spirited debate. Though Marcos refused to resign from the presidency for the election period as called by the constitution, the opposition accepted the opportunity to challenge the Marcos mandate. After much posturing, the opposition put together a ticket consisting of Corazon Aquino as presidential candidate and Salvador Laurel as vice presidential candidate.

Probably the most serious issue regarding the conduct of the election in the pre-voting stage was opposition access to the media. Under its status of Dominant Opposition Party, the United Nationalist Organization (UNIDO) was entitled to specified access to national television and radio called COMELEC time. In particular, the pro-Marcos controlled television stations permitted only limited access for the opposition. There is, however, a very active opposition print media and radio network that enabled the opposition to air its views.

On December 15, the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) was accredited by the official Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to serve as an independent non-partisan poll monitoring group. NAMFREL earned much praise for its efforts to ensure a fair election in the 1984 National Assembly elections. Both the opposition and the Reagan Administration viewed the accreditation of NAMFREL as conducive to a fair election in 1986. In a vivid testimony to the spirit of democracy in the Philippines, NAMFREL was able to mobilize up to 400,000 volunteers to monitor the voting and counting process.

Conduct of the voting on February 7 and the subsequent canvass varied in degree of irregularities throughout the country. In the southern Luzon provinces of Camarines del Sur, Albay, and Sorsogon, one of us witnessed or received verifiable reports of:

- o In some polling places the supposedly indelible ink used to mark the finger of voters could be washed off easily with soap and water.
- o Several instances were reported of ballot boxes being seized and carried off by armed men.
- o There was widespread evidence of vote buying.
- o Several members of NAMFREL were manhandled, threatened, or forced out of their poll-watching stations.
- o COMELEC was inexplicably slow in counting the returns at some municipal and provincial canvassing centers.
- o The official list of qualified voters frequently was not in order, thus disenfranchising sizeable numbers of voters.

In the Mindanao provinces of Davao City, Davao del Sur, and Davao del Norte, election day was largely peaceful. The NAMFREL and COMELEC representatives in Davao City cooperated closely and NAMFREL was allowed to conduct its own quick count. Yet we witnessed or received verifiable reports of:

- o NAMFREL workers in one town were accredited unnecessarily late on February 6.
- o Scores of disenfranchised voters who were culled from voter registration lists were observed around the COMELEC registrar's office in Tagum, capitol of Davao del Norte.
- o Poll watchers were intimidated from entering one voting center in the town of Tadeco.
- o Vote buying was widely reported in rural areas in all three provinces.

In Negros del Norte, a province created in early January, NAMFREL and opposition workers were harassed considerably before the election. Before voting began on February 7, NAMFREL was discredited throughout the province save for two towns. No opposition or NAMFREL volunteers were allowed to observe the provincial canvass in Cadiz.

The most widespread form of fraud was voter disenfranchisement, or wholesale deletion of pro-opposition voters from registration

lists. NAMFREL estimates that perhaps 3.3 million Filipinos systematically were culled from registration lists, primarily in areas where the opposition was strong.¹ In Quezon City, Metro Manila, an opposition stronghold, voter turnout was estimated to be 72 percent, compared with 87 percent in the 1984 election.² In the Marcos stronghold of Abra, by contrast, turnout for both elections was 96 percent. The final National Assembly tally showed 77 percent turnout of registered voters on February 7 nationwide compared to the 1984 national turnout of 87 percent. If the bulk of the lower turnout was due to deliberate disenfranchisement, then this alone may have denied Aquino victory.

On February 11 the final canvas moved to the National Assembly, which is charged with compiling the final count and proclaiming the winner. The opposition challenged the validity of most of the 140 final vote tallies, or certificates of canvas. The Assembly finished its count on February 15 and proclaimed Marcos the winner. The opposition was not allowed to debate the validity of the certificates of canvas which it had challenged.

The Philippine and international media have reported many other irregularities at every level of the election process, from the campaign, to the polls, to the preliminary counts by NAMFREL and COMELEC, to the final tally made by the National Assembly. It is clear that the great majority of the irregularities were committed by Marcos supporters. And the level of irregularities was sufficiently high to justify the charge of a fraudulent election in the minds of a vast number of Filipinos. Rather than using the elections to create a new mandate for leadership as he had hoped, Marcos polarized Philippine society as never before and threatened his own legitimacy.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE U.S.

On December 5, 1985, the Reagan Administration declared that the U.S. is "...prepared to work with any government which is formed as the result of an electoral process that is credible to the majority of Filipinos."³ And on January 31 Ronald Reagan said:

1. William Branigan, "Manila Unit says 3.3 Million Lost Vote," The Washington Post, February 14, 1986, p. A14.

2. Francis X. Clines, "Citizens Group Tells of Ingenious Vote-Fraud Play," The New York Times, February 16, 1986.

3. Statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State John C. Monjo before the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, December 5, 1985.

...If the will of the Filipino people is expressed in an election that Filipinos accept as credible---and if whoever is elected undertakes fundamental economic, political and military reforms--we should consider, in consultation with the Congress, a significantly larger program of economic and military assistance for the Philippines for the next five years.⁴

Fraud has undermined the credibility of the election. This creates an enormous policy problem for the U.S. because it brings into possible conflict competing national interests.

On the one hand, the building of democratic institutions in the Philippines demands that the U.S. not sanction the clearly fraudulent February 7 elections. For the most part, the violations of the spirit of democracy were initiated, if not by Marcos himself, then by his supporters at various levels. The Reagan Administration must make clear its condemnation of such practices.

Although the election did contribute to the building of a two party system in the Philippines, the election results were so manipulated that confidence in the democratic process was undermined in the minds of many Filipinos. Statements by the Administration approving Marcos's continuation in power, therefore, risk alienating the large and politically active segment of the population which supported Aquino.

The survival of the democratic process in the Philippines requires an organized opposition committed to a democratic process. If frustration within the opposition mounts, Aquino and the Catholic Church might lose control of this opposition to radicals who may provoke violence. This in turn could prompt Marcos to crack down hard on the opposition. This only will aggravate violence. Disintegration of the moderate opposition would swell the ranks of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its front organizations.

The U.S., of course, should not undermine the Marcos government, whatever its faults. But neither should Washington lay on its hands of approval on Marcos--or Aquino. The proper U.S. role as a friend of the Philippine people is to discourage violence by all parties, support moderates throughout the political spectrum, and to help both sides get together should they wish to avoid widespread civil disorder.

Continued access to Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Force Base is crucial to a strong American military and political presence in the

4. For the text of the President's statement, see The New York Times, January 31, 1986, p. A10.

Pacific and Indian Oceans. A withdrawal from these bases would be a significant strategic setback for the U.S. But permission to use the bases is a matter to be negotiated between Washington and the government of the Philippines regardless of who is president. The issue of continued U.S. access to Philippine military bases is not more important than the preservation of democracy. If the U.S. sets the bases as its highest priority, then Washington makes itself vulnerable to criticism from the moderate opposition who supported Aquino and to manipulation by the Marcos government, which would demand increased aid and political support in exchange for access to the bases.

The building of democracy in the Philippines at this time is more important than using any means to secure use of Clark and Subic. If the Philippine democratic process is not defended by the U.S., then the bases may well be lost in any case when subsequent governments come to power in the post-Marcos era.

Washington must convince Marcos--or his successor--to carry out major political, economic, and military reforms immediately. If Manila is willing to proceed with the reforms, the Reagan Administration and Congress should design an aid package to ensure their implementation. This probably will require substantial amounts of U.S. aid, and the assistance should be evaluated on its own merits, not as base rental. Large sums are justified because building democracy in the Philippines, improving the well-being of the Philippine people, and blunting the communist insurgency serve U.S. interests.

The U.S. must continue military aid which supports reform within the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Cutting or suspending military aid will demoralize the Philippine military and damage U.S. efforts to promote needed reform. The size and activity level of the Communist New Peoples Army will likely increase as a result of the election. As such, the U.S. must continue to support military reform to enable Filipinos to defend against the NPA. To cut military aid during this crucial period would be irresponsible.

The Administration must ensure, however, that U.S. aid is spent for the purposes for which it was approved. This will require specific targeting of funds and closer monitoring of how they are used. Options to be considered include delivering increased economic aid through the Catholic Church and placing auditors in the separate military regions to ensure military aid is properly utilized.

Above all, Washington must make it clear to Americans, the world, and particularly Filipinos: the aid is not for Marcos; it is for the Philippine people.

Given the intense polarization of Philippine society in the wake of the election, the U.S. must draw up contingency plans in case of

widespread civil disorder. Such plans should include the withdrawal of American civilians and enhanced protection of American military facilities around the Philippines. Thus far, U.S. citizens and property have not been targeted either by the communist New People's Army or the political factions of Marcos and Aquino. The best way to prevent attacks is to avoid direct intervention in the current political struggle between Marcos and Aquino forces. Nonetheless, elements of the U.S. armed forces in or near the Philippines should be placed on alert in case it is necessary to defend American lives and property.

Finally, it is imperative that finishing touches be given to Pentagon plans to relocate the facilities found at Subic and Clark. Hopefully, this will not be necessary if the Philippine political situation stabilizes and Manila can get on with the urgent task of reforming the nation's economic and military institutions.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of the bitterly fought Philippine presidential election, Washington must set clear policy priorities and pursue a five-point strategy:

1) Washington must seek to slow down and stay the political disintegration in the Philippines as the society becomes increasingly radicalized between supporters of Marcos and opposition leader Aquino. An immediate congressional cutoff of military and economic aid will impose severe limits on the Reagan Administration when it needs flexibility in a very fluid situation.

2) Reagan must try through his personal representatives to defuse the current crisis. But the U.S. can only assist a Filipino solution. Marcos thus must agree to some mechanism to bring the moderate opposition into the nation's decision-making process.

3) The U.S. must continue working closely with the Philippine government to define and execute political, economic, and military reforms. The rampant economic cronyism which has stifled economic growth must end and the armed forces must be depoliticized. The Administration and Congress must be ready to urge Manila strongly that upcoming local elections be fair and credible.

4) When it becomes clear that reconciliation in the Philippines is underway, the Administration and Congress should design economic and military assistance programs to help achieve the specific reforms. Given the country's rapidly deteriorating security situation, military assistance to the Armed Forces of the Philippines must receive a high priority if they are to mount a successful counterinsurgency effort against communists.

